

Spring 2000

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West Virginia and Regional History Collection

NEWSLETTER

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JESSE STUART COLLECTION ELUCIDATES EXISTENCE IN W-HOLLOW

*I am a farmer singing at the plow
and as I take my time to plow along
A steep Kentucky hill, I sing my song.
Man with a Bull-Tongue Plow, 1934.*

It was with these simple lines that Jesse Stuart burst onto the American literary scene in 1934. The words began the opening sonnet to Stuart's *Man with a Bull-Tongue Plow*, a volume of verse about the ebb and flow of life, and death, in the hills of eastern Kentucky. If a bit "rough-hewn," critics found the book to be a refreshing respite from the dense symbolism of other poets of the age. Readers delighted in its sentiment, its local color charm, and its timeless homespun philosophy. The young writer was instantly hailed as "an American Robert Burns."

A collection of 67 books written by and about Stuart, including many signed and inscribed first and early editions, was recently donated to the Regional History Collection by Maryan Dahmer of Pendleton County. Along with related materials including more than 100 autographed letters written by Stuart to Dahmer, the collection is believed to comprise the greatest single resource for the study of the life and works of this celebrated central Appalachian author.

Jesse Hilton Stuart (1906-1982) was born and raised in the small community of W-Hollow, Kentucky, just a few miles west of Huntington, West Virginia. He first became interested in literature while attending high school in nearby Greenup, Kentucky. After graduation, he worked briefly in a steel mill before enrolling at Lincoln Memorial University in Harrowgate, Tennessee, where he received encouragement from Harry Harrison Kroll. He later continued his studies at the George Peabody College for Teachers and at Vanderbilt University under John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren and David Davidson.

Though Stuart earned respect, but not always satisfactory grades, from his illustrious teachers at the latter institution, he was largely discontented with his experiences as a graduate student. He later referred to these years in

his life as "a failure." In 1933, he decided to abandon graduate study, return home and "write to suit myself the way I damn well please."

What suited Stuart was writing about the world he knew and loved – the Kentucky hills, its people, old loves and lovers, the changing of the seasons:

*When golden leaves begin to shiver down
Among the barren brush beneath the trees,
And scarlet leaves and yellow and light-brown
Begin to play in wind and pepper down
To earth— these clean and frosted leaves drip down,
Then it is time the corn is in the stack,
Potatoes in the hole—hay in the mows.
This is the time rust has grown on the plows;
The time to haul the pumpkins to the shed,
Since frosts have come and pumpkin vines are dead.
And this is time to garner autumn fruit,
Give unto earth the waste—you take the loot—
And time to run the apples through the press
And share the multi-colored ruggedness
Of shreds that drop from each tree's golden dress.*

Man with a Bull-Tongue Plow (#14)



Poet Laureate of Kentucky, Jesse Stuart gives a local history lesson to Maryan Dahmer ca. 1970.

To his surprise, Stuart found that the subjects that suited him suited others as well. When *Man with a Bull-Tongue Plow* appeared the following year, the book received the Jeanette Sewal Davis Prize of 1934. Not long afterwards it was named to a list of the "100 Best Books in America."

Stuart invited his readers further into his world in the prologue to his next book, a volume of short stories titled *Head o' W-Hollow* (1936):

[The] road that leads to W-Hollow is a wagon road, the first three miles of it. For the rest it's a cow path, a goat path, a rabbit path, a fox path, a mule path-- it is whatever you want to call it. But the drum of the automobile is far away. The clockin of the horses hoofs used to beat this road-- and still does....

W-Hollow is a place in the sun, fenced in by the wind...its just a place with four seasons, wind, sun, rain, snow, — with scrub oaks and old log houses and new plank shacks—a place that's somewhere for some and nowhere for most.

In the spring you can hear the beetles and the whippoorwills...you can hear the wind slushin around in the leaves. In the summer you can hear the wind and the corn blades parleyin around. You can hear the grasshoppers and the crickets. You can hear the lazy wind.... The whole Hollow looks lazy in the summer sun. And the sun allus shines on W-Hollow in Kentucky. It never reaches some of it until noon. But it gets there.

In the fall you can see the brown leaves along the path, and you can see them flyin in the wind. You can hear the beetles in the bean-patch--and down in the old cornfields. Falltime is good to hear in W-Hollow...a place in the sun, walled in by the wind and the hills,—nowhere for many—somewhere for some.

The great natural beauty of this isolated place formed the backdrop for a diverse set of stories about life in Appala-

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chia, its hardships and pleasures, and the values and lifestyle of its inhabitants, good and evil, comic and pathetic, heroic and frail. One story, "Dark Winter," tells of a family's near starvation during a hard winter when the father becomes bedridden. Another, "Bellin of the Bride," is an uplifting tale of communal celebration. Critics praised the book for its penetrating characterizations and finely crafted scenes, as well as for the author's clever use of regional idioms and dialect. The book led to Stuart's receipt of the second major award of his as yet brief career, a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1937.

Stuart's triumphs continued to mount in the ensuing years. His first novel, *Trees of Heaven* (1940), the tale of a patriarch sharecropper named Anes Bushman, helped earn him an award for achievement in literature from the American Institute for Arts and Sciences in January 1941. His second, *Taps for Private Tussy*, the humorous story of how a deceased World War II soldier's life insurance benefit transformed the lifestyle of his formerly impoverished mountain kin, received the Thomas Jefferson Southern Award for the best Southern book produced in 1943.

Accolades poured in again several years later with the publication of Stuart's autobiographical book, *The Thread that Runs So True*, which traced Stuart's personal odyssey in the field of education, from child of a farmer who could barely write his name, to student, teacher, administrator, author and lecturer. The National Education Association recognized the volume as the "Best Book of 1949." The Association's founder and president, Dr. Jay Elmer Morgan, pronounced it "the best book on education in the last fifty years."

Five years later, in recognition of his outstanding contributions and talents, the Kentucky legislature installed Stuart as the "Poet Laureate of Kentucky." He would retain this prestigious post for the next thirty years.

Jesse Stuart's pen continued to flow with amazing fluency for the remainder of his career. Indeed, until suffering a disabling stroke in 1978, he published at least one book in most years, and often two or three. Collections of short stories and poetry, novels and books for children, nearly all are set in the environs of Stuart's beloved W-Hollow, a place as yet undefiled by modern technology, where an age-old way of life prevails. It was Stuart's uncanny ability to communicate the essence of this world through careful natural observation, and penetrating human characterization aided by a



Maryan Dahmer (left) poses with Jesse and Naomi Stewart, ca. 1970.

clever use of dialect, that led critics such as J. Donald Adams to praise him as “a local colorist of the first rank—probably the best we have produced in the United States.”

The late West Virginia University Appalachian literature scholar Ruel Foster, perhaps best summed up Stuart’s contributions in the final chapter, “Elegist of a Lost World,” of his 1967 biography *Jesse Stuart*:

Jesse Stuart...a prober and chronicler of the Appalachians, the last American frontier—[was] the regional writer par excellence.... Through W-Hollow and its peoples shine universals—a kind of unconscious welling up of stoicism, endurance, eternal laughter, love.... And the region he has created has now taken its permanent place in the timeless geography of American fiction. It will keep its place there long after more fashionable writers of the present have faded completely away.

THE JESSE STUART — MARYAN DAHMER CORRESPONDENCE



Regional History Collection curators John Cuthbert and Michael Ridderbusch examine one of more than one hundred handwritten letters by Stuart in the Jesse Stuart Collection.

In addition to 67 books, 24 periodicals and dozens of reviews and news clippings, the Jesse Stuart Collection includes more than one hundred letters and cards sent by Stuart to Dahmer between 1966 and 1976. The letters reveal much about Stuart’s character, ambitions and opinions on various topics ranging from literature to politics. His attitudes are generally in keeping with the tenor of his work as a spokesperson for the citizens of rural Appalachia – independent, moralistic, and isolationist. Several letters display the same contempt for all manner of public officials and government that runs throughout Stuart’s work. A letter of January 11, 1967, reveals that Stuart spurned numerous requests to throw his own hat into the political arena:

Day before yesterday I got a phone call to run for [state government]. Today I got two more. All refused, such

has no lure for me. I’ve worked with all “the boys” in both sides, Republican and Democrat, and I know I don’t want state office.

Though Stuart was a world traveler, the letter goes on to reveal that his isolationist views extended to world politics. He was especially disturbed by the Federal Government’s courting of ties with foreign powers that were unfriendly to the U.S.:

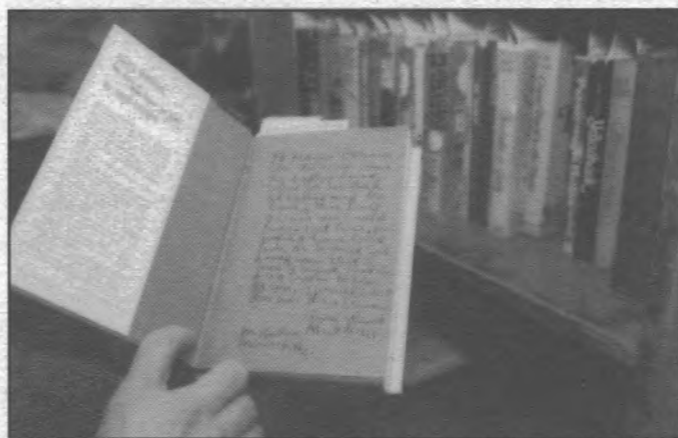
LBJ’s State of the Union Message, (did you hear it) More of the same. Just expansion of all money for our enemies. I disagree violently with this. I’ve traveled more and know you don’t buy friendship – let them come to us!

In regard to his literary preferences, Stuart’s letters reveal that, “The old testament has always excited me. It’s such great writing.” His contemporary favorites included William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck. “Both Faulkner’s and Hemingway’s pictures hang in my room,” he noted. “Steinbeck’s would too if I had one.” Of his teacher, Robert Penn Warren, he expressed the opinion that while he was “good on research and scholarship, ...RPW can’t write a story.”

A lover of books, Stuart had a special appreciation for the people who cared for them. After attending a conference of the American Library Association he wrote that he found the Association’s membership to be “a wonderful group of very prominent people who do much for America’s destiny.”

A number of the letters concern the efforts of Dahmer and several others to promote Stuart’s candidacy for a Nobel Prize, an award he coveted but which eluded him as did the Pulitzer Prize which he disdained: “...who needs it.”

Stuart did receive many accolades during the course of his long and highly prolific career, including a Guggenheim fellowship and appointment by the state legislature as the Poet Laureate of Kentucky, a post he held for more than thirty years.



Included among the books in the Stuart Collection are 41 signed and inscribed first editions.

PEARL BUCK AND MURIEL DRESSLER MANUSCRIPTS
HIGHLIGHT ADDITIONAL ACCESSIONS
BY REGIONAL AUTHORS

It is well known that art forms one of the greatest measures of a civilization, as well as one of the keenest means of understanding the values, goals and character of its people. In the latter respect, in the opinion of Walt Whitman at least, "over all the arts, literature dominates, serves beyond all."

From the travelogues of David Hunter Strother (1816-1888), to the poetry of Danske Dandridge (1854-1914), and fiction of Breece D'J Pancake (1952-1979), the works of state and regional authors represent one of the foremost means of comprehending not only the facts but also the values and "ambience" of our history. Thanks to the powers of observation, talent for description, and special insights of their creators, each narrative, poem, novel, represents a unique portal through which we may vicariously travel to, and immerse ourselves in, a particular time and place. It is for this reason that the preservation of regional literature has been an area of special emphasis at the West Virginia and Regional History Collection for more than half a century.

Along with the Jesse Stuart Collection, the Regional History Collection is pleased to announce the recent acquisition of materials relating to three other notable regional authors: Muriel Dressler, Pearl Buck and Davis Grubb.

Muriel Miller Dressler spent nearly her entire life in the small Kanawha County town of Witcher. Though she never finished high school, she was a voracious reader as well as the daughter of a woman who allegedly quoted Chaucer as she hoed corn. Dressler worked in seclusion until her writing was discovered by William Plumley of Morris Harvey College's Appalachian Center during the late 1960s. When the Appalachian Center published her poem "Appalachia" in 1969, she achieved considerable fame. The poem was reprinted in numerous local and national publications.

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APPALACHIA

Muriel Miller Dressler

I am Appalachia! In my veins
Runs fierce mountain pride: the hill-fed streams
Of passion; and, stranger, you don't know me!
You've analyzed my every move - you still
Go away shaking your head. I remain
Enigmatic. How can you find rapport with me -

You, who never stood in the bowels of hell,
Never felt a mountain shake and open its jaws
To partake of human sacrifice?

You, who never stood on a high mountain,
Watching the sun unwind its spiral rays;
Who never searched the glens for wild flowers,
Never picked mayapples or black walnuts; never ran
Wildly through the woods in pure delight,
Nor dangled your feet in a lazy creek?

You, who never danced to wild sweet notes,
Outpouring of nimble-fingered fiddlers;
Who never just "sat a spell" on a porch,
Chewing and whittling; or hearing in pastime
The deep-throated bay of chasing hounds
And hunters shouting with joy, "he's treed!":

You, who never once carried a coffin
To a family plot high up on a ridge
Because mountain folk know it's best to lie
Where breezes from the hills whisper, "you're home";

You, who never saw from the valley that graves on a hill
Bring easement of pain to those below?

I tell you, stranger, hill folk know
What life is all about; they don't need pills
To tranquilize the sorrow and joy of living.
I am Appalachia: and, stranger,
Though you've studied me, you still don't know.

One of Dressler's biggest fans was author and screenwriter Earl Hamner, creator of *The Waltons* television series. Hamner, in fact, wrote a screenplay based upon one of Dressler's poems. Another fan was Jesse Stuart, who once commented, "If Muriel Dressler had not existed, she would have had to be invented.... She has a way of getting right at the heart of the region's uniqueness as well as at the pressure that many Appalachians feel to conform."

In addition to correspondence, news clippings and other biographical materials, the newly acquired Dressler papers include an extensive collection of unpublished poems by the celebrated poet.

The Davis Grubb and Pearl Buck acquisitions are comparatively modest in size but notable in their content. A native of Clarksburg, Grubb is best known for his novels *Night of the Hunter* and *Fool's Parade*, both of which were recast as major motion pictures, starring Robert Mitchum and James Stewart, respectively. Shortly before his death in 1980, Grubb recorded several hours of readings of his works. Among the six sound recordings acquired by the Regional History Collection are the author's readings of *Child of Small Consequence*, *Craven Quick* and *Tally Vengeance*.

The Regional History Collection's extensive holdings of papers and manuscripts by the Nobel Prize-winning author Pearl Buck were recently augmented by the acquisition of a typescript screenplay, with handwritten notes by Buck, of her novel *Imperial Woman*. The script was prepared for a proposed motion picture in which Sophia Loren was to star in the title role.

THE SENATOR TOO YOUNG TO SERVE

Readers are challenged to test their knowledge of state and national political trivia with the following two questions:

1. What United States Senator was forced to sit out the first six months of his term because he had not yet reached the qualifying age of 30?
2. What West Virginia politician sought the office of Governor as both a Democrat and a Republican?



The Young Senator, ca. 1936.



The Holt Collection includes an extensive group of original political cartoons relating to Senator Holt's career. This 1934 campaign cartoon offers a virtual resume of the young senatorial candidate's accomplishments, qualifications and political platform.

Give up? Remarkably, the answer to both of these questions is the same: Rush Dew Holt. A two-year project to organize, inventory and preserve the voluminous papers of this colorful West Virginia leader is now nearing completion.

A native of Lewis County, Holt was born in 1905. He attended West Virginia University and Salem College, graduating from the latter institution in 1924. He subsequently worked for several years as a high school and college teacher and coach before entering the political arena in 1930.

Holt was only 26 when he began his political career as a Democratic member of the State House of Delegates in 1931. When he won election to the United States Senate three years later, he became the youngest senator in United States history. Though the term was to begin on January 3, 1933, Holt had to wait until his thirtieth birthday on June 19, before officially accepting his seat.

During the next five and a half years, the precocious young senator from West Virginia became known as an outspoken firebrand. Though initially a supporter of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, he was frequently at odds with the Roosevelt administration's social programs and "stranglehold" on the reins of government. He later became an ardent opponent of the President's quest for an unprecedented third term of office.

After failing to win reelection to the Senate in 1940, Holt shifted the focus of his attention back to his home state. He

remained a fixture in the state political scene for the next decade and a half. He was elected to the State House of Delegates on the Democratic ticket in 1942, 1944, 1946, and 1948, and on the Republican ticket in 1954. He competed unsuccessfully for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination in 1944, for the United States Senate on the Democratic ticket in 1948, and for the Republican gubernatorial nomination in 1952. His remarkable career was brought to an end by his untimely death in 1954 at age 49, an age at which many politicians are in the advent of their careers.

The Senator Rush Dew Holt Family Collection consists of nearly 200 linear feet of material including correspondence, both political and personal, photographs, newspaper clippings, political cartoons, greeting cards, newsletters, publications, broadsides, sound recordings, and a state flag. The date span of the collection ranges from the mid-1800s to the present.

In addition to the papers of Senator Holt, the Holt Family Collection contains documents relating to the lives and careers of several other members of this prominent family, including Senator Holt's wife, Helen Froelich Holt, and son, Rush Dew Holt, Jr. Mrs. Holt was thrust into politics when she was appointed to complete her husband's term in the House of Delegates in 1955. She went on to forge a notable and productive career in her own right, both in federal service and as West Virginia's first female Secretary of State. The Holts' son, Rush Dew Holt, Jr., is currently a freshman member of the United States House of Representatives (D-New Jersey).

The extensive work of preserving and improving bibliographic control of this immense collection, which has been acquired by the Regional History Collection in installments over the past half century, has been supervised by Holt Project Historian Amanda DeBastiani. Under her guidance, the entire collection has been reorganized, reformatted as required, and conserved in new acid-free archival containers. A new inventory, including a detailed index to selected components of the collection, has been created.

These steps assure that the record of the lives and achievements of one of the most fascinating families in political history, both locally and nationally, will be preserved and accessible to those who have an interest in studying them for many years to come.



The nation's youngest U.S. senator addresses a crowd in Shinnston, April 4, 1936.

SELECTED RECENT ACCESSIONS

William D. Barns Collection. Papers, 1960-71. 1 in. Gift, 1999. ADD A&M 3279.

Papers preserved by former WVU professor William D. Barns relating to Dr. Thomas Clark Atkeson (1852-1935), the first dean of West Virginia University's College of Agriculture. Appointed to the faculty in 1897, Atkeson was instrumental in developing the agriculture and forestry programs at the University. These papers were acquired by Professor Barns from Atkeson's daughter, Mary Meek Atkeson. Included are biographical notes concerning Dr. Atkeson and his daughter, a checklist of Dr. Atkeson's papers, and assorted correspondence between Professor Barns and Mary Meek Atkeson.

Maurice Brooks Papers. 1965-72. 3 in. Gift, 1999. ADD A&M 3162.

Articles authored by West Virginia University forestry professor Maurice Brooks, including a typescript and galleys for *The Southern Appalachians* and an article in the January 1972 issue of *National Wildlife* entitled "West Virginia: The Paradox of a Forgotten State."

Pearl S. Buck Collection. Typescript, ca. 1960-69. 1 in. Acquired, 1999. ADD A&M 727.

Typescript screenplay with handwritten annotated notes by Pearl S. Buck of her novel *Imperial Woman* in which Sophia Loren was proposed to star.

Caretta and Coalwood. Typescript, ca. 1910-1983. 1 in. Gift, 1999. A&M 3337.

A typed manuscript history of the McDowell County coal mining communities of Caretta and Coalwood, written by Homer Hickam. The two communities were founded early in

the twentieth century as coal camps by George L. Carter, who was a mine operator. The fortunes of both towns represent the economically cyclical nature of mining throughout the twentieth century.

Congo Oil Refinery. Archives and photographs, 1970-90. 3 ft. Gift, 2000. A&M 3348.

Two volumes of blueprints and specifications, loose blueprints, and loose slides of the equipment and operation of the Congo Refinery Plant of the Quaker State Oil Company along the Ohio River in Hancock County near Newell, West Virginia.



The Quaker State Oil Company's Congo Refinery, ca. 1975.

Muriel Miller Dressler. Papers, 1970-89. 2 ft. Acquired 1999. A&M 3322.

Manuscripts, publications, news clippings and photographs regarding the West Virginia poet and lecturer Muriel Miller Dressler. A Kanawha County native, Dressler was born on July 4, 1918. Raised in the rural community of Witcher, she had limited formal education but was a voracious reader. She was inspired to pursue her interest in writing by her mother. Dressler's poetry, which explores the roots of Appalachia and its people, began appearing in print in 1969. Two collections of her poems, *Appalachia, My Land* (1973) and *Appalachia* (1977), were published by Morris Harvey College Publications. Dressler was a longtime West Virginia Department of Education poet-in-residence. She was also a winner of Morris Harvey's Appalachian Gold Medallion.

Davis Grubb. Sound Recordings, 1979. 6 cassettes. Acquired, 1999. A&M 3323.

Sound recordings of the celebrated West Virginia author Davis Grubb reading three of his own short stories as part of an audio project undertaken late in the author's life by William Plumley, an English professor at Morris Harvey College (now the University of Charleston). Included are Grubb's readings of *Child of Small Consequence*, *Craven Quick*, and *Tally Vengeance*.



Poet Muriel Dressler poses wearing the Appalachian Gold Medallion awarded to her in 1973 by the Appalachian Center at Morris Harvey College.

Metropolitan Theatre. Archives, 1983-2000. 1 in. Gift, 1999. ADD A&M 3254.

A 1983 National Register of Historic Places nomination for the Metropolitan Theatre located in downtown Morgantown; three 1998-1999 "Spotlight" newsletters of the Metropolitan Theatre Preservation Foundation featuring the foundation's activities and accomplishments; and two clippings (1999, 2000) from Morgantown newspapers regarding the renovation of the Metropolitan Theatre.

Thorton T. Perry Collection. Archives, 1790-1935. 3 in. Acquired, 1999. A&M 3343.

Broadsides, maps, pamphlets, almanacs, and a ledger from the collection of the noted Charles Town antiquarian, Thornton T. Perry. Many of these items pertain to the Civil War era, particularly the John Brown Raid on Harpers Ferry and the formation of West Virginia as the nation's thirty-fifth state. Other items include a German language newspaper published in Wheeling in 1868, and a late eighteenth-century account book from the Martinsburg firm of Thomas Shepherd and Daniel Morgan, in which values are recorded in English currency.

Sleeth & Stumm Families. Archives, 1795-1968. 1 in. Gift, 1999. A&M 3340.

Birth, baptism, marriage, and death records from family Bibles of the Sleeth and Stumm families of Monongalia County.

Jesse Stuart Collection. Papers, 1934-82. 1.5 ft. Gift, 1999. A&M 3347.

Correspondence, publications and photographs regarding the noted Appalachian author and State of Kentucky Poet Laureate Jesse Stuart. The collection contains 41 signed first and early editions of Stuart's books, many of which bear lengthy inscriptions by the author. Among the manuscripts component are more than 100 letters written by Stuart during the 1960s and 1970s. As a whole, the collection is thought to be the greatest single resource for the study of the life and works of Jesse Stuart.



Pocahontas County native and Nobel Prize winner Pearl Buck, 1959.

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Jesse Stuart, see pg. 1.